

Traditional Uses of Wild Plants in the East Mountains

**A mini-guide to traditional use of wild
plants as food and medicine near
Ojito de San Antonio
Bernalillo County Open Space**

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Traditional Uses of Wild Plants:

Local traditional use of wild plants as food and medicine.

Almost all modern medicines are derived from plants or compounds with chemistries produced by plants. Prior to the era of scientific study, testing, extraction and promotion of drugs as cures and commodities, folk knowledge about plants formed by experimentation over generations was passed down in families and villages. There often were individuals that possessed special knowledge of the local plants and their uses hence there were medicine “elders”, both men and women, who were sought out for relief of or cures for animal and human illness and disease.

Archaeological evidence shows that indigenous populations collected and saved plants and seeds for thousands of years for food and medicine. When the Spanish arrived from the “Old World”, they brought their own well-developed Judeo-Christian traditions including the use of plants as medicine, spice, and food and introduced scores of plants to the “New World”. They also adopted new plants and uses known to the Native Americans. Although the two broadly defined cultures did not share belief systems or types of ritualism, the use of a particular plant, perhaps through trial and error, was often deemed similar throughout a particular region, as many of the Mint family plants are used to calm the stomach. Then again, one plant can have many uses. Take for example, the Buffalo Gourd (Calabazilla) or *Cucurbita foetidissima* is used extensively throughout New Mexico. Portions of the plant make a very strong purgative. A very young gourd can be eaten. Roots are ground by the Tewa Indians and mixed in cold water and taken as a laxative. The fruit pulp can be used to wash hair and clothing. I have noted the local references in the text.

Wildcrafting is the term used to describe collecting wild plants for food or for crafting medicines and health care potions. Please note that wildcrafting is illegal in National Forests and on many other public lands. It is important to understand that the art of healing using wild plants requires years of accumulated knowledge and experience in identifying plants, knowing when and where to find them, divining the appropriate times of the year to harvest, choosing what parts to use, and preparing and prescribing for use. The leaves, roots, and flowers of a given plant may all be used as fresh or dried in preparations as diverse as a decoction (extraction by boiling as in tea), a poultice (a mashing of the plant, perhaps with heat, that is applied to an area of the body), or a tincture (an alcoholic extract). Care must be taken to not to destroy the plant source by over collection. Domestic propagation, whenever possible, of specific plants is advised. The chemical compounds produced by plants can be toxic and poisonous if not respectfully understood and employed.

The plants in this brochure are a sampling known to exist in or nearby Ojito de San Antonio Open Space. As is so often the case, one type of plant is identified by many names and in more than one language. This reality, which varies from village to village and continent to continent, is what led to taxonomy, or a form of global scientific classification. Each of the plants pictured is accompanied by names that I gathered from local Spanish-speaking and English-speaking communities, the scientific classifications, and some of the local uses gleaned from a few sources that were available to me. If wild plants and their uses are of interest to you, there are many resources. A short bibliography is included.

Becky Schnelker, Master Naturalist, 2011

Antelope horn milkweed *Immortal*



Scientific classification

Family: Asclepiadaceae

Genus: *Asclepias asperula*

A powder of the dry plant is sniffed to cure headaches. The root is crushed and boiled and used for fever, hayfever, diarrhea, and as a tranquilizer, as well as a mouth wash for loose teeth; a tea (unclear from what part) is drunk to aid women in child labor.

Brook mint, Field mint, also called Pennyroyal **Poleo**



Scientific classification

Family: Lamiaceae

Genus: *Mentha arvensis*

This sweet-spicy light mint found near water can be taken as a simple tea for feverish headaches and dizzines; it settles the stomach and can be used as a cholic remedy for infants. It is also used to reduce cramping when menstruating. Rubbed on the skin it wards off insects.

(Also referred to as Pennyroyal.
See *Hedeoma pulegioides*,
American Pennyroyal)

Buffalo gourd, Coyote gourd, Wild Gourd
Calabazilla, Chilicote, Chilicoyote



Buffalo gourd (large leaf) in a field of Sundrops (yellow) and Purple Geraniums.

Scientific
classification
Family:
Cucurbitaceae
Genus: *Cucurbita*
foetidissima

The root is boiled and used for bathing arthritic areas of body. The gourd is often collected and decorated for ornaments and used to make rattles.

Cowpen daisy, Goldweed, Crownbeard
Añil del muerto



Scientific
classification
Family:
Asteraceae
Genus: *Verbesina*
enceliodes

The leaves can be chewed to relieve stomach upset or cramps. They are also boiled to relieve gas or as a wash for skin disease. It is also used as an anti-

inflammatory to relieve rheumatism and ulcers.

Curly cup gumweed
Yerba de buey



Scientific classification
Genus: Asteraceae
Family: Grindella squarrosa
(G. nuda var. aphanactis)

It is used to treat bronchial asthma. As a poultice, it is used to treat burns, poison ivy, and various other skin eruptions.

Greenthread, Navajo tea, Hopi tea
Cota



Scientific classification
Family: Astearceae
Genus: Thelesperma
megapotamicum

The flowers and stems are boiled for tea and used for stomach aches; *Cota* is reputed to be beneficial for the kidneys (mildly diuretic), to alleviate digestive problems (especially stomach cramps), and to purify the blood.

Horehound *Mastranzo*



Scientific classification
Family: Lamiaceae
Genus: *Marrubium vulgare*

A hot tea is brewed for head colds, asthma, or other chest ailments; it was used by early Spanish settlers to treat colds and flu. The tea induces a mild sweat. It is also used as a cooling fever bath. Syrup made with honey, sugar, and *Mastranzo* is used for coughs; dried, it can be mixed with other herbs to make other remedies.

Horse nettle, Silver-leaf nightshade Tomatillo del campo



Scientific classification
Family: Solanaceae
Genus: *Solanum elaeagnifolium*

The berries were used as rennet to produce cheese. It can be used as a purgative, but too strong a potion can cause death.

Horsetail, snakeweed
Cola de caballo



Scientific classification

Family: Equisetacea

Genus: Equisetum L.

Horsetail or *cola de caballo* is a plant that is used for a medicinal tea used to treat bladder and kidney infections. In some areas, the plant was used by Native Americans to polish wooden tools, as it has an abrasive quality.

Juniper, one-seed
Belota de Sabina, Rama de Sabina



Scientific classification

Family: Cupressaceae

Genus: Junipernus monosperma

Juniper berries are crushed to cook and eat with venison. The berries are boiled and put in bath water for rheumatism and arthritis. A hot tea is drunk for stomach or kidney ailments as well as bladder infections.

Juniper wood is also used as fuel for cooking and heating homes.

One-seed juniper (left) in contrast to Rocky Mountain Juniper (lower right)

Lamb's quarters, pigweed *Quelites*



Scientific classification
Family: Amaranthaceae
(Amaranth)
Genus: Chenopodium
(Goosefoot)

Lamb's quarters or *quelites* are gathered as food, usually fried with onions, another wild food, and eaten as a side dish. It is added to soups and stews to add nutrition. Although it is high in sodium, it is a good source of Niacin, Folate, Iron, Magnesium and Phosphorus, and a very good source of Dietary Fiber, Protein, Vitamin A, Vitamin C, Vitamin K, Thiamin, Riboflavin, Vitamin B6, Calcium, Potassium, Copper and Manganese.

Mormon Tea, American ephedra Cañutillo del Campo



Scientific classification
Family: Ephedraceae
Genus: Ephedra
torreyana

Ephedra can be boiled as a tea and used to treat bladder and kidney infections. It acts as a diuretic.

Mountain Parsley Chimajá



Scientific classification

Family: Apiaceae

Genus: *Pseudocymopterus*
montanus

All parts of the plant were eaten. A source commented that it is very tasty and is hard to find close to homes in Carnuel, NM, these days. Since the flowers and roots were eaten, it is not surprising that it is hard to find there.

Also called *camote*.

This plant is generally found at a higher altitude than the terrain around the Ojito de San Antonio.

Oshá



Scientific classification

Family: Apiaceae

Genus: *Ligusticum porteri*

Oshá does not grow in the Ojito de San Antonio, but is found at 7,000 to 10,700 feet in elevation. I include it, because it is always mentioned in discussions about beneficial wild plants and seems to be used for curing everything from curing stomach disorders, headaches, sore throats, to even warding off rattlesnakes, spiders, and even witches.

BEWARE: Its appearance is dangerously like poison Hemlock. Both are in the Parsley family.

***Piñon* or Pinyon**
Also Pine pitch or *Trementina de Piñon*



Scientific classification

Family: Pinaceae

Genus: *Pinus edulis*

It is boiled and mixed with cilantro and cinnamon to breathe in the steam under a towel for relief of headaches. Its nutritious nuts provide food, and the wood is used for fuel.



The pitch is chewed as gum. Soft *trementina* mixed with candle wax is used as a salve for chapped hands, sores, and cuts. Heated, applied, and cooled on the skin, it was pulled off to remove a deep splinter or puss from an infected area

Purslane
Verdolaga



Scientific classification

Family: Portulacaceae

Genus: *Portulaca olearacea*

High in nutrition, *verdolaga* is eaten raw in salads or fried up with various dishes. It is said to build up resistance to disease and is supposed to quiet the nerves.

Prickly pear or Beaver tail cactus
Nopal, Tuna



Scientific classification
Family: Cactaceae
Genus: *Opuntia phaeacantha*

The tender young paddles are boiled after burning or cutting off the spines and then eaten. The *tuna* or red fruit that develops after flowering, is also eaten.

Rabbitbrush, Rubber rabbitbrush
Chamiso blanco, Chamisa, Chamsal



Scientific classification
Family: Asteraceae
Genus: *Ericameria nauseosa*,
formerly *Chrysothamum nauseosus*

It is used as tea for rheumatism and to reduce fever. Body parts suspected to have cancer are bathed with a solution of it.

Scarlet Globemallow and Copper globemallow (pictured

here)

Yerba de la negrita



Scientific classification

Family: Malvaceae

Genus: Sphaeralcea
angustifolia or
Sphaeralcea
coccinea

The leaves and flowers are mashed and used to wash hair; boiled up like a tea, it is used as a rinse and believed to make hair grow long and shiny. It is useful for insect bites. The leaves and

stems are boiled for foot bath to relieve soreness. It also is taken as a laxative and used to cure stomach ailments; baths in *agua de la negrita* help reduce high fever.

Snakebroom, Broom snakeweed *Yerba (Escoba) de la Vibora*



Scientific

classification

Family: Asteraceae

Genus: Gutierrezia
sarothrae

The whole plant is boiled in water and the solution is used to bathe cuts, abrasions and infections including dish-pan hands. It can be used as a simple tea and soak for arthritis.

Wormwood, Mugwort ***Estafiata***



Scientific
classification
Family: Asteraceae
Genus: Artemisia
ludoviciana

It is used as a tea for colds. Put into bath water or used as a poultice to relieve aches and pains. It is also boiled to a tea mixed with other herbs for stomach pain, gas pain and ulcers.

Willow ***Jarita***



Scientific classification
Family: Salicaceae
Genus: Salix spp.

There are many species of willow in wet areas of New Mexico. The use of it was not mentioned in some of my resources. However, it was commonly used as an astringent gargle for sore gums and sore throats. As a tea it can be used for feverish headache and arthritis. It is used like aspirin, and those with allergies to aspirin should not use it.

Yarrow
Plumajillo



Scientific
classification
Family: Asteraceae
Genus: Achillea L.

A tea is made from leaves to relieve stomach ache; the leaves can be made into a poultice to prevent infection and promote healing; it also can slow bleeding.

Yellow sweet clover
Trebol



Scientific classification
Family: Fabaceae
Genus: Melilotus officinalis

A tea is boiled and drunk for heart ailments; *trebol* water is used to bathe athlete's foot.

Yucca, Banana Yucca
Amole, Palmilla



Scientific classification

Family: Agavaceae

Genus: Yucca baccata

(Also applies to Narrowleaf Yucca,
Yucca glauca)

The roots are beaten into a soap to wash hair and rugs. The leaves are used as rennet to make cottage cheese.

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